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Casaglia, Anna; Laine, Jussi P.

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Casaglia, A., & Laine, J. P. (2017). Towards a re-articulation of the relationship between state, territory, and identity through a situated understanding of borders: conclusion. *Europa Regional*, 24.2016(1/2), 93-96. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-54454-3>

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Towards a re-articulation of the relationship between state, territory, and identity through a situated understanding of borders

Conclusion

ANNA CASAGLIA and JUSSI P. LAINE

Drawing conclusions from a collection of different research papers – deriving from a variety of contexts and addressing diverse topics – is challenging, yet it is also a product of the fact that border dynamics are context-specific. While most borders are prone to the same global phenomena (LAINE 2016), there are, as the articles in this special issue indicate, different context-specific responses to these trends. The line of continuity in this special issue arises from the concerns we outline in the introduction. Traditionally, state sovereignty has presumed and justified an alignment between territory, identity, and political community, whereas discourses on sovereignty, security, and identity have formed the very basis of the territorial state. Borders, according to this logic, mark the edges of a sovereign space, and therefore represent the confines of its power, jurisdiction, and territorial control. In this special issue, we have sought to challenge this taken-for-granted vision and argue that the border instead presents much more complex social and territorial phenomena, manifesting themselves at diverse spatial and geographical scales. State borders continue to be deeply constitutive of the way in which social change and the conventional dichotomies of mobility/immobility, inclusion/exclusion, domestic/foreign, national/international, internal/external, and us/them are thought about and discussed. However, as the concept of a border has become increasingly blurred, so too have these traditional binary divisions.

It is now recognised that the term “border” no longer refers simply to the physical boundary itself but increasingly

encompasses its various representations as well (NEWMAN 2011; SIDAWAY 2011; BRAMBILLA et al. 2015). Abundant reflection has been dedicated to the growing interest in border studies in Europe, both within and outside academia, because of both the political changes that have influenced the continent’s geopolitical asset and the consequences of EU enlargement. This shift has been accompanied by policy debates about immigration, trade, and security related to the redefinition and management of borders. It has become widely accepted that “borders are a complicated social phenomenon related to the fundamental basis of the organisation of society and human psychology” (KOLOSSOV 2006, p. 606). The conceptualisation of the border has evolved over time, with the development of an ever more critical understanding of its nature and its relationship with territory, nation states, scales, and politics.

With a more relational understanding of space, the focus shifts from a narrow two-sided one to the various systems permeating it and the actual meaning they contain. While considerable differences can be observed in this respect, depending on the context and the region in question, it seems justified to claim that at the general level the power of borders has been profoundly altered and disaggregated (AMILHAT-SZARY & GIRAUT 2015). There has been an extensive set of events and developments, which suggest that the ascendancy of the territorial model has oversimplified the border concept and reduced it to the mere institutional apparatuses through which they are controlled and governed. Instead, borders are

constituted through many more institutions than the nation state, and the various novel bordering processes associated with the multiplication of sub-national global scalings entail a partial denationalising of what has historically been constructed as national (SASSEN 2015, p. 29).

The debate within border studies at the heart of this collection includes fundamental contributions by various authors (PARKER et al. 2009; PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012; SIDAWAY 2011; BRAMBILLA 2015) who are increasingly abandoning the idea of the border as a “line in the sand”, an entity taken for granted, for a deeper and broader interpretation of the border as a space of complex interactions and “site of investigation” (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012, p. 728). The traditional superimposition of the territory and function of state borders needs to be questioned by a definitive overcoming of the “territorial trap” (AGNEW 1994), “now even more inadequate for conceptualising the spatial and temporal coordinates of everyday life” (PARKER & VAUGHAN-WILLIAMS 2012, p. 728), since the relationship between borders and territory is neither linear nor obvious.

State borders remain, yet their meaning has become increasingly unsettled. Borders may seem static and fixed, yet at the same time constantly changing and fluid. They are not the same for all, and they come with different symbolic and material forms, functions, and locations. Perhaps most important, borders are not only the business of the state (see RUMFORD 2013), and they are increasingly challenged by actors whose ability to function does not necessarily stop at the

political border. Focusing on such complementary aspects of bordering allows us to consider the enabling conditions they bring about as a means to open rather than close political boundaries and, in so doing, be open to the re-articulation of the spaces and scales that has previously been obscured in the prevailing analyses that have assumed the territorial linearity of the nation-state system.

The context in which this contribution took shape is of great importance, too. A series of processes has led to the “return of geopolitics” (DIEZ 2004) and increased the attention paid to border management and control. This is apparent, for example, in the EU’s more restrictive visa regime and border controls, which have created tensions with neighbours and introduced unseen restrictions based on selective mobility. This process has also altered the relations the EU builds with its neighbourhood, which in many cases becomes a buffer zone for the external management of migration and the application of the border regime (DEL SARTO 2010), exemplifying how the border appears to be multi-located both within and outside EU boundaries. The transformation of the EU’s relationships with its neighbourhood has also led to the privileging of formal relations at the expense of the more hands-on, local forms of cooperation that were once key ventures of the European project. While many of the original interests to promote cross-border cooperation at both the governmental and non-governmental levels remain unchanged, the reality of this cooperation nevertheless demonstrates the persistence of state borders and the weakness of a bottom-up approach to cooperation.

At the same time, the EU’s soft power and identity are being challenged by powerful neighbours and by different external political crises (MOROZOV & RUMELILI 2012), while the rise of national populism and Euroscepticism undermines the Union from within. Assertive power politics are challenging the EU’s influence, and countervailing forces have emerged confronting the EU’s foreign policy in the “shared neighbourhood”. Moreover,

political crises at the edges of the EU and associated with it, such the Ukrainian one, have challenged the EU’s role as a political actor; while at the domestic level the integrity of the Union is scrutinised and opposed by the growing nationalism and Euroscepticism fuelled by populist discourses on terrorism, threat scenarios of illegal immigration, and Islamophobia (BIGO 2016). These discourses are not properly counterbalanced by an inclusive and realistic understanding of migration and multiculturalism, and this is leading to an increasingly cultural-civilisational definition of a “European” us against the perceived threat of the other.

The attention this collection devotes to border-related issues results from the observation that borders are key to an understanding of the crisis of the European project and the challenges it is facing. Borders are not merely fundamental to the outcome of European securitisation policies; they provide a prism to better understand the ongoing geopolitical dynamics and the social phenomena related. To broaden the perspective of the traditional notions of state demarcation, we pay extra attention to the role of the human experience, interpretation, negotiation, and articulation of borders. Combining these perspectives, we believe, provides a powerful link between the various processes of social and political transformation, conceptual change, and local experience.

Within the border prism everyday experience is a key lens through which we can shed light on alternative understandings of borders and the meanings attributed to national boundaries, as well as on the different scales of interpretation of borders. The contributions in this special issue – from their diverse contexts, focuses, and frames – all analyse different activities at and across borders which have an impact on landscape, people, and the border itself, as well as on how they are shaped by political, social, or economic events. These activities can be performed by institutional agencies – as in the case of cross-border cooperation, the reorganisation of services, and the revitalisation of urban neighbourhoods – or by border

inhabitants and users, who cross or use the border for work, business, leisure, shopping, petty trade, and other purposes.

Despite the endurance of the national metanarratives, these are increasingly challenged but also complemented by a multitude of more regionally and locally based narratives and discourses. Borders are important spaces, where questions of identity, belonging, political conflict, and societal transformation are discussed and acted out. Laine and van der Velde have shown that even the categories of identity and belonging can bring the classical territorial understanding of borders into the discussion, since people’s sense of belonging can often rely on myths and historically disguised “facts” which create more relational transboundary spaces. This is especially true in situations where meanings attributed to disputes about borders have evolved in parallel with geopolitical transformations that somehow diminish the importance of the border and the attachment to territory. In moving away from the traditional juxtaposition of identity and national boundaries, we can understand the original features of borders and people’s relationship with them, which is socially constructed throughout history. The state’s allure has not faded, although many of its contemporary social processes are clearly beyond its scope. However, even political state borders are not only political; and nor are they only maintained by the state. Subtler socio-cultural processes are also involved, as well as actors beyond the conventional state structures. To understand this multiplicity of actorhood, a more focused and localised interpretation of borders is needed (BRAMBILLA 2015), which allows us to better capture the different scales and actors involved in the process of border making, re-making, and un-making.

The contributions in this collection also point to the need not only to examine what and where borders are, but how they function in different settings, with what consequences, and for whose benefit. There are many kinds of border; they tend to acquire different meanings

according to the different activities people relate to them. A border may be open and closed at the same time for different activities and flows. They protect and enclose, but also enable and facilitate. Borders can be resources (SOHN 2014) when, for example, economic asymmetries provide the opportunity for petty trade or for shopping tourism, as exemplified by the comparative study presented in the article by Smętkowski, Németh and Eskelinen. Aspects of both stability and volatility may be detected in relation to developments in shopping tourism across the Finnish-Russian border, as their study demonstrates. Overall, their investigation of the two cases on the EU's external border illustrates that cross-border shopping is a multifaceted phenomenon, affected by various economic and socio-cultural factors as well as administrative and (geo) political conditions. Understandably, the economic implications of the recent geopolitical crisis have had repercussions for different aspects of border crossings related to shopping, since shopping behaviour, in reflecting socio-cultural factors, is less responsive to changes in market conditions than behaviour based on monetary calculations (driven by economic conditions).

Borders can in turn represent an obstacle to daily activities when they become more difficult to cross, as exemplified by Ted Boyle's paper on the South Ossetia case, where top-down discourses on the border as the "little Berlin Wall" accompany the construction of an actual barrier that impedes traditional forms of cross-border exchange and border crossing. Borders and border discourses can help in building national narratives, especially where sovereignty is not recognised or is contested. In this sense describing the "Administrative Boundary Line" that separates the de facto state of South Ossetia from the remainder of Georgian territory as the "Little Berlin Wall" has the double outcome of underlining the illegitimate nature of the border and discursively positioning Georgia within Europe. This narrative operates at the local, national, and wider regional scales and builds

imaginaries that relate to wider geopolitical references, and it coexists with other and even conflicting narratives, as MEGORAN (2013) also shows in talking about ethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan. In his analysis of this case study Boyle also demonstrates that the border provides a unique vantage point to examine the intersection of the different scales around which the border acquires symbolic and often contrasting meaning. It is at this juncture that the analytical insights to be garnered can best be grasped.

Another important aspect of borders, which emerges from this collection, is their instability, which implies the need to revisit them in light of constantly changing historical, political, and social contexts, grasping their shifting and undetermined nature at various scales. Roser Pastor Saberi's, Margarida Castañer i Vivas' and Diego Varga Linde's longitudinal study of the land use of the Franco-Spanish border area, in showing the changes affecting the border due to social and political transformations, demonstrates that although the state has traditionally determined the configuration of border landscapes, their evolution today has become primarily based on relationships between the local and the global spheres. Borders are the products of a social and political negotiation of space, and at the same time condition how societies and individuals shape their strategies and identities, and thus how the landscape is shaped.

Matteo Berzi's work underlines that the processes of territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation are not exclusionary, but occur simultaneously and can be interpreted differently from geographical, cultural, and historical perspectives. He provides evidence that a specific local milieu borderlands display has been and is affected not just by the evolution of border functions, but also by the fluctuations in policies made and applied at different levels (national, international, and sub-national). Borderlands should not be seen as massive quantities, but as unique multi-layered structures in which every layer has its own scale and is part of a more extensive layer. The

different levels can be motivated by very different, at time antagonistic factors, motives, and spatial imaginaries, some reproducing and others transcending the border. Berzi vividly describes how borderlands are commonly characterised by specific forms of living together that entail tolerance and solidarity. Borderlanders, he explains, over time have been able to adapt themselves and take advantage of the border's presence. At the European level it is exactly this notion, which has contributed to making cross-border cooperation effectively a territorial strategy applied at peripheral borderlands. The evolutions of EU policies from above and local and regional initiatives from below are converging towards new models of cross-border territorial management. The effect of the border depends on the capability of people and regional systems to cross the border, yet the borderland milieu may create and enforce a dynamic of its own. They are unique spaces, characterised by their own cultural, socio-economic, and aesthetic landscapes. As Berzi suggests, community-led initiatives, based on local needs and on shared territorial capital, may represent a feasible alternative for local development, which is endogenous, based on its uniqueness and exclusivity, and may cross borders, creating joint projects, plans, and new-shared institutions.

Finally, borders can also be useful for an understanding of the processes of urbanisation, as Siarhei Liubimau shows in his contribution by juxtaposing bordering and scaling. This understanding of urbanisation is seen from a new perspective when confronted with the broader complex selective processes of the re-bounding or re-scaling of space. His article demonstrates that the change in border regimes results in a newly prevailing scalar formation negotiated materially in the urban fabric. This causes new types of use of space and the re-coding of practical meanings of already existing spatial configurations. Built environments become strategic localisations of the "politics of scale" and material toolkits for new scale making in border conditions. The suburb

taken into consideration by Liubimau is a newly emerged spatial unit of multi-scalar determination, where we see the effect of socio-political transformations of the border and processes of normalisation. The author defines a scalar tendency impact on the development of a selective model for the unification of border towns, which also involves a change in the meanings of borders themselves.

In all, this special issue underlines the need to soften the sense of borders and state, and rethink the very notions of territory, sovereignty, self-determination, identity, and citizenship, as well as the conventional arguments, which maintain them. A move from a static territorial linearity to more relational understandings of both space and borders will allow us to challenge and re-articulate the ready-made worlds of practices and discourses concerning borders' functions and uses. While borders attempt to shape space along state-centred scales of discourse and practice, the socio-spatial context providing the conditions for their existence and change extends across scales. At their intersection, borders are constantly negotiated and performed. They thus produce, but are also a product of, social relations that unfold across different scales of discourse and practice. If we are to grasp these different layers and to challenge the traditional understanding of the relationship between identity, territory, and borders, a situated analysis is needed, utilising case study research and a focus on the unexpected, original, and unusual relationships, activities, and interactions occurring at and through the border. The observation of changes over time and their connection with geopolitical events at a local, regional, and global level is also essential for outlining possible explanations for the transformation of border regions from a social, economic, and territorial perspective.

This special issue's contributions' diversity and richness show that border studies continue to be a privileged lens through which we can understand geopolitical processes and their outcomes at the local level, as well as issues of sovereignty,

identity, and their related narratives. This research area also gains complexity and thickness because of its interdisciplinarity, evident in this collection, and the variety of approaches that creates a dialogue across different academic traditions and literatures.

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Dr. Anna Casaglia
Assistant Professor Dr. Jussi P. Laine
University of Eastern Finland
Karelian Institute
Yliopistokatu 2, Aurora
(P.O.Box 111)
FIN-80101 Joensuu
Finland
anna.casaglia@uef.fi
jussi.laine@uef.fi